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Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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SIMPLIFICATION OF MODERN LIFE.*

BY C. DE LA CHEROIS-CROMMELIN.

I FEEL most diffident in addressing an audience like this among whom I know are so many whose thoughts are constantly directed towards making their lives approach as nearly as possible to an ideal. Many of these, moreover, in their recognition of the supreme importance of intellectual and moral development, have felt themselves obliged to conform in the little things of life to the ordinary standards of fitness, in order to economise time and thought, and also, perhaps, from a feeling that a certain condition of ease and æsthetic enjoyment is a necessity for the most highly civilized human beings. When people argue in this way I always think of the Irish peasants. Few people have such a paucity of the ordinary necessities for enjoyment or even for existence, and yet, whenever I go in and out amongst the cottagers in Donegal and Antrim, I am quite startled at the spiritual lives these peasants live. As soon as they are raised above actual want, they seem to give up trying to get richer, and to study the deeper things of life. "You must be less busy now that all your family are grown up," I said to a woman last summer. "Och indeed, I do have plenty to be doing, whitening my soul, though it's but little I can do," was her answer, and it expressed herself.

Like Eastern mystics, they are vividly conscious of the behind and before of life. "It is after all just like a wee step from the door to the window," as a woman said to a friend of mine, and for such a mere interruption of eternity, what need is there to fret and toil and suffer. Moreover, life to them is not limited to the society of their tiny villages, for stretching over their bare fields and moorland is another world in which spirits and ghostly presences walk at large. To these people the unseen is very near, and very palpable, and the material world sinks into insignificance.

* Paper read before the Dulwich Branch of the P.N.E.U.

But I am afraid we do not all reach the level of these simple peasants. We most of us inherit a complicated tangle of affairs which we cannot wholly ignore. We have not the making of our initial conditions, and we generally pass through childhood with the comfortable belief that the way things are done at home is the standard of how they ought always to be done. Many indeed adhere to this belief long after they are grown up, but to others comes a time when they realise that they live in an overcrowded atmosphere. The furnishing of the house is ugly—the rooms are crowded with things that take the housemaid a long time to clean, but are neither useful nor beautiful. There are unnecessary servants, unnecessary engagements for parties that give no pleasure, unnecessary clothes, duties, forms of speech. In fact, all life seems unnecessary, and that which should be the guiding principle of it, one's own real *self* or *soul* (made up of intellect, emotions, and conscience), is about the one thing that has no part or lot in this vast intricacy of affairs.

Now there is no good trying to reform our predecessors. Those who have tried the experiment have generally only succeeded in arousing bitter resentment against themselves in particular and the whole younger generation in general. But there comes a time when each of us starts life for herself, and then it needs all our strength and forethought to avoid creating conditions that may grow too strong and finally domineer over us, or at any rate prevent the full expression of our best selves.

I think perhaps we do not often enough define what our object in life is, or rather what perfection is, since, as there are no culminating points in life that must be led up to, and prepared for, the object must simply be to live perfectly. "Doing our duty in the state of life unto which it shall please God to call us," is a definition that to many people is sufficient, but to me it leaves the two most important questions unanswered. What is our duty? What state or circumstances of life are most in harmony with the divinest order of things? Since certainly very few of us are permanently tied to the conditions in which we are born, and I think we have most of us abandoned the idea that there is a definite degree of luxury or grandeur to which our family is entitled, and which we are bound to maintain.

A definition therefore of an absolutely perfect life, or absolutely perfect living, must include a certain ordering of external circumstances, a having or not having of definite things or experiences.

I must say at once that I cannot give such a definition, nor indeed can anyone else,—one might as well try and explain the meaning of the universe. But there are some things which it seems to me must have a place in the perfect life, both because they seem absolutely good in themselves, and because, when experienced, they open up to us further views and possibilities. In a word, they satisfy some of our infinite craving for perfection.

First of all then *work* is good—not perhaps all work in the same degree, for that which appeals to our reason as being useful in itself is much better than that which only supplies an artificial need. No thoughtful person, I think, who has ever tried it will deny that work is convincingly good for us, yet the older economists persistently treated it as always an undesirable—though inevitable—concomitant of satisfying our needs. They thought it necessary to allow for its deduction, in estimating the desirability of the total result. How much truer Ruskin's view of it is,—the most recent writers are all coming to admit! It is true that it is generally the need of wage earning that leads people to work. It is also true that many—very many—workers see no beauty in it, and would gladly at any moment give it up and live a life of ease instead. Yet it is none the less true that those who do it, not as mere machines, but with a sort of confidence that what is so fundamentally necessary must have a large meaning, find that they are in closer union with the universe by means of it. It forms, first of all, relationships between man and man, thus creating a larger unit than the individual; and not only a larger unit, but a *new* one, which somehow justifies itself, by which I mean that when a network of human relations is formed—when we live for and love each other as well as ourselves—we seem to have got nearer to the solution and purpose of life, than if we were struggling for ourselves alone. Such a relation or connection seems to me absolutely good—a step, however small, towards perfection.

Secondly, work draws us into deeper sympathy with the natural world. We seem to be taking a conscious part in

the production and change and development that go on unceasingly; especially in the most primary and necessary work of all—tilling the ground—our activity is but an adjunct to the great processes of nature. The sense that we with our little spades and pitchforks, and she with her wind and thunder and sunshine, are yet working in the closest unison, produces a kind of rapture that Tolstoy has finely described in *Anna Karenine*, when Levin, who has toiled all day with the Moujiks, feels the exquisite meaning and benediction of a shower, which his brother, sitting lazily at home, looked upon as a tiresome interruption of the day which somehow *ought* to have been fine all through.

Closely related to *work*, and equally necessary for the perfect life, is *knowledge*. The one indeed produces the other. How delightful it is to talk to a mechanic and hear him describe the machines that he knows and loves like children, or to learn from a fisherman about the tides and currents and counter currents that he has discovered and made allowance for. Or how wonderful is a naturalist's reverent scrutiny of some small modification of colour or shape which shows Nature's crafty ingenuity in fitting the plant or animal for its little world. How invigorating it is to learn a new language, or a new way of making a pudding, or to discover a relation between things that before seemed wholly disconnected. And the joy of all this is, that each piece of our knowledge connects us closer with the life of the whole. The more we know about the universe the more intimate we become with its truths, its laws, its beauty. Certainly, too, expression of what we feel or know is good. It is almost instinctive in us to voice our thoughts in some way. We may regard this, too, as work or production—giving an outer substance to what at first is hidden and unknown to all except ourselves.

Both work and knowledge put us in relationship with other people. This relationship to be perfect should not be merely mechanical, but should include love, tenderness and personal sympathy. It seems to me that we are absurdly clumsy and unpsychologic in the way we treat other people's personality, yet it is absolutely necessary to realise personality if we are to be closely bound to others, as seems right and beautiful and almost necessary. As Matthew Arnold says, "Perfection,

as culture conceives it, is not possible while the individual remains isolated. The individual is required under pain of being stunted and enfeebled in his own development if he disobeys to carry others along with him in his march towards perfection, to be continually doing all he can to enlarge and increase the volume of the human stream sweeping thitherward."

I feel with him that any definition of good must include the conscious effort to help others, and what a splendid throbbing thing life becomes when we are bound to others by love, and are trying to realise the same perfection for them as for ourselves; whereas some people who in interest and ambition have always lived to themselves alone, seem perpetually, in their narrow egotism, to make us distrust the *raison d'être* of human life at all.

But I am afraid you will think that all this has nothing to do with simplicity of life. I think it has though. Before discussing whether certain conditions are good or bad, it is necessary to make up our minds what are real essentials of perfect living. I have tried to show that work, knowledge, intercourse with men and things are good in an absolute sense. When we work we are happy: we are not perpetually asking, "Why am I here?" "What is life?" (not that these questions could be definitely answered by us if another person asked them); but with our whole being we are acquiescing in the universe; and so with knowledge, and close human relationships. If this be so, then a life that ignores these essentials must be unsatisfactory, and yet such a life is considered the "right thing" by many thousands of the richer classes.

For instance, one of the most common ways of spending money is having a great many servants. Now, leaving the moral question alone, supposing even that our conscience allowed us to have slaves, what is the result on ourselves? We have someone to do our hair, someone to mend and brush our clothes, someone to put coals on the fire, someone to bring us our letters, someone in fact to put into action any wish or whim that suggests itself to our mind.

How miserable all this is. The custom of being always waited on makes one inactive, unknowing, unattached to life. There is no possibility of growth, no place left for that

glowing exquisite joy of conquering difficulties for ourselves. Just as we become really richer by every increase of power—by learning to plait our own hair, light a fire, harness a horse—so we become poorer the more we lean on other people to do for us what we ought to do for ourselves.

There is something beautiful in an austere life in which there are few wants, but it is more beautiful still when the person is capable of supplying his own, and more than his own, wants. There is, on the other hand, a hideous disproportion when a child is educated to have many wants, and is yet left incapable of supplying them. It seems to me that in this respect it is public opinion that needs reforming. There are certainly fewer luxurious schools than there were. I do not think getting into a carriage gracefully is any longer taught as a fine art; yet in the ordinary home life of well-to-do families there still survives the belief that the right thing is to be waited on, that it would be "dreadful to be seen" washing up, or opening the hall door, or doing any of the things that a servant is accustomed to do.

Personally I feel that the only justification of having servants is that they leave us free to do work that is useful to the community and that we can do better than we can household things. But when there are several grown-up daughters (or even sons) at home—consumers and not producers—I think there is no excuse for their being waited on; and the aimless dreary life of the girl-at-home would have a new impetus and keenness if she were paid a salary by her father for doing housework, instead of being left free to do unnecessary fancy work, or create imaginary "businesses." How unnatural all this is, is shewn by the wretched physique of so many whose occupation is *society* only. At the end of the London season they have to go to Homburg to build up their exhausted strength, or undergo a course of massage or Swedish drill in order to give their bodies artificially the activity that Nature demands.

Another way of spending money is in the accumulation of possessions, and this again is a hindrance to, rather than a producer of, happiness. First of all, each thing almost that we introduce into our houses in an additional care. We may not realise this, if we have many servants and we say, "I must have curtains, carpets, pictures, ornaments." Now

there may be a reason for curtains and carpets. They give trouble to the duster and brusher, but they may be worth the trouble, by making us warmer, and, therefore perhaps, more capable creatures. And there is a reason for pictures and ornaments too. They may be beautiful and what is beautiful, we say, needs no other justification. I shall come to this point again. For the present let us assume that it is true—that the beauty of things is a sufficient argument for having them, yet still our capacity for appreciating this beauty is limited and it is unpsychologic to transgress this limit. One beautiful bowl on our table may give us intense pleasure, two may give us a little more but not double as much, certainly many will give us less pleasure than one, whereas in firm arithmetical progression, each one adds equally to the labour and responsibility.

But there is an even stronger reason against accumulation of possessions. They set up barriers between ourselves and other people. An extravagantly furnished house raises round itself an atmosphere of unapproachableness which everyone feels, but which poor people are especially conscious of. It is so palpable that the treasure of the owner is there—in the china collection, or the pictures, or outside in the too exquisite flower beds—that we know the heart is there too, and we cannot talk freely or be simply friendly without running the risk of injuring it. Edward Carpenter describes how the rich sometimes hedge in their hearts by barriers as labyrinthine as the Minotaur's lair. I believe the beginning of this building is too great love of possessions. "Now that we've got a new carpet in the study we must be more careful about dirty boots. You'd better see those poor men in the hall." This is the beginning. We are putting up more than the thickness of our new carpet between our humanity and theirs.

In yet one other way the conventional society life seems to be unsatisfactory. To be happy, we must have intercourse with our fellows, we must live in our generation. But this intercourse must have its roots in common interests and common enthusiasms. Aristotle studied life enough to see this, and he said that we must be friends "about something." Yet I do not think it is sufficiently recognised that the friends we make because we have interests and ideals in common are friends in quite a different sense from those that a girl makes

who goes to parties every night and meets some other girl so often that she finds they have "heaps in common." What I have said applies just now more to friendships between men and men, or between women and women. The 19th century has seen the recognition of women as being entitled to the same intellectual and economical advantages as men. One of the beautiful results of their being able to take a fuller share in the world's work has been that they have combined with each other in sympathy and friendship and love in a way that men have known about for ages, but women never before, and I believe that more has yet to be, and that the 20th century will see a fuller union and sympathy between women and men, when they both will meet on an equal footing, doing the same work (in different ways possibly) and sharing the same responsibilities. A lady who has devoted her life to girls' clubs and temperance societies said lately—that the need of such organizations for one sex only would soon be at an end.

I have tried to point out some disadvantages in an ordinary conventional, luxurious life. Now I want to summarise the advantages gained by a simple life, or rather, having regard to my first definition, to show that by a simplification of external conditions we can live more perfectly.

And here I must say that I am not going to give a specimen of weekly accounts, or to suggest cheaper dressmakers, or to discuss whether soup *and* fish are necessary for our daily portion. No, my idea of simplicity is an attitude of mind rather than a hard and fast rule. To me it means cultivating the habit of doing *and* doing without; *doing* work regularly, cleverly, conscientiously, and *doing without* as many things as we can, provided only we do not starve or weaken our bodies, our minds, or our emotions. I am not advocating austerity pure and simple, which means cutting ourselves off, even from things that do make us more efficient. In general it means guiding our lives by our own individual reason, conscience and sense of fitness, rather than accepting the standard of others, or forgetting the needs of the whole human society. The beauty of such a life has appealed to great men all through history. Buddha preached it long ago by the Ganges; his followers lived in the open air and gave up all. Christ said, "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the

kingdom of heaven." Paul could imagine "having nothing and yet possessing all things." Francis of Assisi married Holy Poverty. He gave up everything not because he hated things (no one ever lived in tenderer relations with all things in the world—fire, water, birds and beasts were his sisters and his brothers)—but because he understood the whole too well to care for that mechanical connection that we call possessing, and besides there were the poor, his sisters and his brothers, too; he must live and work for them. In our own day Tolstoy works with the labourers on his farm. To him the perfect life has a most definite meaning. It is in work, he preaches, and in right relations to others, and in loyalty to the moral law within that the kingdom of God becomes manifest.

First of all, then, simple conditions are far more beautiful than any others. Nothing is uglier than excess of ornament. Architecture degenerated when the stern branching lines of Early Gothic flowered into the too great richness of Decorated or Flamboyant. Giotto's perfect simplicity of composition means more to us than the far more perfect technique and greater fluency of the *cinquecento* artists. Perhaps nothing that we make nowadays is more beautiful than a ship, in which ornamentation is absolutely subordinated to use. The Greeks are our masters in things of art; they seemed to understand the laws of beauty intuitively; but they were able to put into words one great principle—"Nothing over-much;" "the half is greater than the whole." I wish we applied these laws more universally to our houses and to our dress. How beautiful a room seems that has very few things in it, but those exquisite of their kind, or even perfectly simple but fitted for their use. If we once make up our minds firmly that we will have nothing in our rooms that we do not actually require, it is astonishing how many things we can do quite comfortably without. Let us continually appeal to our sense of beauty and fitness, and try and imitate in our little worlds the quiet and space and order that we find in the perfect economy of nature.

Now when we turn to economics we find the verdict which this science gives to be unquestionably in favour of simplicity and adverse to luxuries. It will be useful to examine a few technical phrases, which will, by their very employment in

scientific writings on the subject, show its attitude towards the things dealt with. Economists divide all material possessions under the following heads. In the first place we have *necessaries*, which are of two kinds, viz.: *necessaries of existence*—that is, just so much good clothing and shelter as in any given climate and circumstance may be required to keep a person alive. Now a person provided only with these things is not capable of work. He is without the requisite tools, education, probably even the physical strength for labour. To do a navvy's work, for instance, demands muscles well-nourished by plenty of meat, far beyond the modest allowance which his mere maintenance in existence would permit. A doctor needs an expensive mental and mechanical training, which would be again quite outside the existence-claims. And so on through workmen of all grades. Economy therefore recognises this further demand for a class of material possessions which it calls *necessaries for efficiency*. From the economist's point of view these are the possessions which he would deal out with the most ungrudging hand. Without these to reinforce them the necessities for existence seem but ill bestowed; for these latter merely keep in life a number of mouths which, although they may ask little, yet at any rate give back nothing for that little in return; whereas if you allow a man the further necessities for efficiency, he will at least produce the equivalent of what has been spent on him, and in all probability he will also give to the community an overplus—of the nature of interest. By such a consumer's production the State is the richer and not the poorer. The definition which is given to these necessities for efficiency is that they are everything, over and above the necessities for existence, by the consumption of which a man's output is increased. This, according to the most enlightened economist, is no meagre pittance. It includes other things than what, in common parlance, we called necessities. Rest, recreation, change of air and scene, friends, books, newspapers, even variety of diet, and enjoyment of art may—so long as they stand the test of adding working power, whether directly or indirectly—be necessities for efficiency to some workers.

The second class of goods is all that remains after these have been deducted—a not very important remainder you

may be inclined to think, but unfortunately large out of all proportion to its importance. These are luxuries—the economic definition of which adds nothing to the efficiency of the worker. Everything in excess—rich food instead of plain food, elaborate dress instead of simple dress, ornaments, big houses, sumptuous entertainments—all these and a thousand others which we can easily accustom ourselves to look on almost as wants, must go if we intend to keep within economic approval.

Again, from an intellectual point of view, a life of few conventions, few responsibilities about things is the best. How can we think about big important things if we are worrying about dresses and menus all day long? Yet I know if any here will attack my arguments, they will muster round this point and say, "that's just the reason why we *should* keep plenty of servants; *we* are intellectual, *they* are not; if we have enough they will take all the worry from us, and we can think those valuable thoughts that the world needs." Quite so. This *does* seem to me a good reason why some of us should keep some servants. But, beyond that, there are two ways of freeing ourselves from worries. Either remove the cause of them, or get someone else to worry instead of you. I ask my hearers—paying due regard to the ethical and economic questions involved—which, for the majority at any rate, is the right solution?

Once again it is no small advantage both for ourselves and the State to have strong, healthy bodies, and undoubtedly eating simple food, using our legs in the open air, going to bed reasonably early, are better for us than rich food, carriage exercise, and the dizzying exhaustion of hot rooms late at night. This has all been said over and over again, and is worn quite trite, but I don't think that people thoroughly realise yet how strong work makes one. The usual impulse is to persuade people to give up their work if they feel a little tired, instead of encouraging them to keep to it when a temporary weakness makes them falter.

I am afraid I have been somewhat lengthy in my analysis of the many-sided advantages of a simple life. Yet when all is said, I feel I have left unsaid the greatest truth of all, which is, that such a life is infinitely the greatest and most beautiful that can be lived. For in whatever way we regard

ourselves, we must be conscious of a scale in us from lower to higher—beginning with animal instincts, and lower human instincts of personal property, and rising to an appreciation of intellectual ideas and of an immaterial world. We possess this larger world as soon as we know and love it. That is what possession means, not stuffing our houses with un-useful things just for the sake of showing how rich we are. A poor house-painter that I know in London, who has read—well, everything almost from Shakespere to recent German philosophy, told me that though he bought a good many books he never kept them, for as soon as he had read them the thoughts lived in his brain, and the books themselves, he said, were mere lumber. I think he was mistaken in what he did, but he knew what "*possessing*" meant; and so it seems to me do most people who *really* love pictures, or books, or any beautiful things. They want to see them and get to know them, not necessarily to have them in their houses or call them theirs.

In the importance that they give to external things surely the Irish peasants are right; though in the ordering of their daily lives they certainly seem to lose sight of that perfection which should be sought after in each thing, each word, each thought. Life means to us daily, hourly choosings between the more and less necessary, the more and less beautiful. It isn't possible to develop each artistic impulse, each craving for beauty to the fullest possible degree, for our thoughts and imaginations and yearnings extend beyond human life. We have the infinite world in our hearts; yet the ratio between the importance of the inner world to the outer seems to me really to be expressed by the comparison: "The things that are seen are temporal; the things that are not seen are eternal."